

The Mutual Life Building
601-607 First Avenue
Seattle
King County
Washington

HABS no. WA-42

HABS
WASH
17-SEAT,

3-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORIC REPORT
AND PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Historic American Building Survey
Western Region National Park Service
Department of the Interior
San Francisco, California 94102

HABS
WASH
17-SEAT,
3-

Mutual Life Building
HABS No. WA - 42
(page 1)

The Mutual Life Building

Location: 601-607 First Avenue
Seattle, Washington

Northwest corner
First Avenue & Yesler Street
Pioneer Square Historic District

Date: 1890 - First Floor
1897 - Remaining five floors
1904 & 1916 - Original alterations
1940s - 1960s - Additional alterations

Owner: The Mutual Life Association, Limited, Partnership
216 First Avenue South, Suite 210
Seattle, Washington 98104

Use: Currently unoccupied; to be rehabilitated for
office use on the upper floors and retail and/
or restaurant use at the first floor and base-
ment.

Historian: Susan Boyle
Olson Walker Architects, P.S.

Significance: The Mutual Life Building is an example of Victorian
Romanesque architecture typical of the buildings in
Seattle's historic Pioneer Square. Designed to two
prominent Seattle architects, Elmer Fisher and James
E. Blackwell, it was constructed after the great
Seattle fire of 1889. The site of the building is
significant in Seattle's history as that of Henry
Yesler's cookhouse, the city's first restaurant and
public space. The building's location across from
Pioneer Square and its pergola make it a prominent
part of the historic fabric of the district.

THE BUILDING'S HISTORY

The site of the Mutual Life Building at First Avenue and Yesler Way is one of the most important in Seattle's history. On this approximate location stood Henry L. Yesler's cookhouse (1854-66), the city's first "restaurant and public space." It served at various times as a town hall, courthouse, jail, and hall for religious services. In 1882, the First National Bank of Seattle (the city's third bank) was established here. The existing building, begun in 1890, was originally owned by Henry Yesler. The structure is also associated with two prominent early Seattle architects. Its combined Victorian Romanesque and Chicago style design is a major contributor to the architectural quality of the Pioneer Square area.

Henry L. Yesler is recognized as one of the founders of the City of Seattle. He arrived in 1852 looking for a location for a steam-operated sawmill. Yesler was a "frontier entrepreneur." Besides owning and operating Puget Sound's first steam-powered sawmill, he managed a general merchandising business, operated a grist mill, started the city's first water supply system, helped organize the first gas lighting company and was among the pioneers in mining and transporting coal in the Seattle area. Despite many difficulties with city officials, he was involved in numerous civic activities and held several municipal and county offices including that of mayor. His wealth, however, stemmed from shrewd management of his donation land claim which covered much of the older downtown business district.

He was born in Leiterburg, Maryland, in 1910. After many stops along the way, including the gold fields near San Francisco, and as a carpenter and millwright in Portland, he came to Seattle in 1852.

He operated four sawmills in Seattle, two just west of the site of the Mutual Life Building (1852-1869, 1869-1879), one on a wharf farther west (burned 1887) and the fourth on Union Bay in Lake Washington (burned 1895). The street now known as Yesler Way was the original "Skid Road" or "Skid Row," used for skidding logs down the hill to the mill below.

Yesler provided Seattle with its first entertainment centers. Besides his Cookhouse, he built Yesler Hall at the southwest corner of First Avenue and Yesler Way, and later Yesler Pavilion at the southeast corner of First Avenue and Cherry Street. He also aided in the foundation of a library, and helped start several religious organizations and public and private charities.

Most of his problems with city officials stemmed from disputes over replats and regrading streets. His feeling toward every city surveyor was one of "cordial dislike."

However, after his death on December 16, 1892, the whole city mourned. It had grown from a population of a few hundred, at the time of his arrival, to over 50,000 during his residence. His obituary the next day read ". . . No man labored more than he for the welfare of this city. In every public movement he was among the foremost. . . . The

sawmill he built in the early days and the magnificent buildings reared in his declining years alike attest the faith which he had in the future of the city. His prosperity was the prosperity of Seattle, and he ever felt that Seattle's advancement was his own."

(Post Intelligencer, December 17, 1892.)

The First National Bank of Seattle was incorporated on the Mutual Life site in 1882 by George Harris, Henry Yesler, and John Leary. In 1929, this bank merged with two others, the Dexter Horton Bank and the Seattle National Bank, to form the Seattle-First National Bank, the state's largest financial institution.

From 1883 until the great fire of 1889, a portion of the site contained the ornate wood-frame Victorian Yesler-Leary Building. After the fire of 1889, much of the site of the Yesler-Leary Building became a street in order to form a continuous connection between Front and Commercial Streets, now First Avenue and First Avenue South. The triangular piece of land remaining became Pioneer Place, later known as Pioneer Square.

Construction of the existing building was begun by Yesler in 1890 following plans by Elmer H. Fisher, Seattle's most prolific architect of the post-fire era. Elmer H. Fisher was the leading figure in the architectural rebirth of Seattle following the great fire of June 6, 1889. From that date to the end of 1890, he designed 54 buildings for the city, worth \$3,000,000. Most of these were creative adaptations of the Richardsonian Romanesque style popular during the Late Victorian period.

Born in Scotland in 1840, Fisher studied architecture for five years in Worcester, Massachusetts, under the direction of Boyd & Sons, at the time one of the most prominent firms in the country. Moving progressively west, he settled in Victoria, B.C., in 1883. He designed buildings in Victoria, Vancouver, New Westminster, and Nanaimo before his departure.

He moved to Seattle in October 1888 and worked on several buildings before the fire. The Pioneer Building, designed for Henry Yesler, is his best known and most admired work. In addition to the Pioneer Building and the ground floors of the Mutual Life Building, Fisher designed the Schwabacher and Korn Buildings in Pioneer Square. Others still standing are the Bay Building (Arlington Hotel, recently rehabilitated and renamed The Alexis Hotel) at First and University, and the Austin A. Bell and Hull Buildings in Belltown. Remnants of one of his best designs, the Burke Building, are evident in and around the new Federal Building at Second and Marion.

Only the basement and first floor of Fisher's Yesler Building were completed, though the design was for six stories. An 1891 photograph, available at the University of Washington Library Special Collections, shows the unfinished building during a visit by President Benjamin Harrison. Another photograph from that same year, a view south toward Commercial Street, shows the one-story building, its rusticated pilasters and arched window openings protected by vaulted awnings. The building's character is a reflection of the Pioneer Building (1890) on the Square and the Schwabacher Bros. Building (1889) across Yesler Way,

also by Fisher. Both of these structures retain their rusticated sandstone bases and arched window openings.

After Yesler's death in 1892, his estate was in litigation for several years. This and the economic depression of the mid 1890s held up completion of the building. In 1897, the Mutual Life Insurance Company of New York purchased the property, erected five office floors, and changed its name to the Mutual Life Building. This company occupied the southeast corner of the second floor until 1916. The First National Bank was its major first floor tenant for approximately the same period.

James E. Blackwell is generally credited with being the architect of the rest of the Mutual Life Building, though evidence for this is inconclusive. The top five floors definitely do not follow the design of Elmer Fisher. A lithograph showing his exterior design for the building, the Starr-Boyd Building, and the Pioneer Building indicates a much different configuration, including two pyramid roof towers on the First Avenue facade.

An historic photo by Frank La Roche from the Museum of History and Industry, dating from 1896-97, shows the completed six-story building. Identified then still as the "Yesler Building," it terminates at the top with two common towers, but without the hipped roofs on full height rusticated pilasters proposed in Fisher's original design. Another departure was the rather plain, geometric patterned masonry cornice. Oddly, the entire top floor of the building was modified again in 1897, according to photographic records. The Mutual Life

Company, presumably with architect James Blackwell, changed the building's name and sign, removed the masonry cornice and replaced it with an ornate copper cornice, and simplified the 6th floor windows and roofline to what exists today. This remodel appears to have been completed before 1899, and appears in an 1889 photo of civic celebrations for returning volunteers from the Spanish American War.

Although James Blackwell arrived in Washington in 1890, he first lived in Tacoma and then in Bremerton. Clarence Bagley is the only source which places his arrival in Seattle by 1897. Other sources point to the year 1901.

Blackwell was born in Fauquier County, Virginia, in 1835. He was educated there in civil engineering at Bethel Military Academy, and later worked in the Office of the Government Supervisory Architect in Washington, D.C.

He moved to the State of Washington in 1890, practicing architecture in Tacoma for two years. He then moved to Bremerton where he worked for several years as one of the designers of the first drydock at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard. After moving to Seattle in 1897 (Clarence Bagley, History of Seattle, Volume 3), he designed nearly 200 structures in the city, including a large part of the Mutual Life Building, the Shafer Building, and Colman Dock, as well as Northern State Hospital in Sedro Woolley.

Mr. Blackwell served as resident engineer for the United States Shipping Board between 1918 and 1920, beginning in 1922 as City Superintendent of Buildings. He also served on the city's Board of Public Works and the Zoning Commission. He was still practicing architecture when he died at the age of 84 in 1939.

Whatever the final conclusions concerning the identity of the architect of the earlier Mutual Life Building, Mr. Blackwell was clearly responsible for the final form of the building. He designed the 30' x 100' addition adjacent to the Post Hotel on Yesler Way in 1904, and major alterations to the building in 1916. He maintained offices in the building itself between 1904 and 1910. Except for the ground level design and the unique parapet treatment (the cornice slopes in toward the roof rather than out toward the sidewalk), and a color difference in its exterior buff brick masonry, the 1904 addition is nearly indistinguishable in detail from the 1897 structure. Interior treatment is homogeneous throughout, and can also be attributed to Blackwell. The newer addition is framed with tile-encased steel, in contrast to the older portion, which combines steel columns with heavy timber beams and joists.

The building retained rustication at the first level with arched windows at the southeast corner until 1904. At that time, the rusticated sandstone was ground smooth. The arched windows were retained. The building was purchased by the Shafer Land Company on June 30, 1915. Blackwell's major alteration for the new owner consisted primarily of the removal of the arched windows and entrance

to the basement at the southeast corner, the lowering of the first floor to street level, and the installation of standard wood and plate glass storefronts. These changes were completed in 1916.

Though the upper floors continued to be used for offices until the 1960s, over the years the first floor and basement held a wide variety of retail shops, restaurants, skid road taverns, a reputed speakeasy, and an ice cream parlor.

The building was purchased by Dr. S. T. Magnuson in October, 1955. Wooden paneling, now covering the southeast corner bays, was added in the late 1960s when the Pioneer Banque Restaurant moved into the building. This and subsequent remodeling of the first floor was under the direction of the architect Ralph Anderson, whose office was located in the building for a brief period in the early 1960s. After the Pioneer Banque Restaurant closed in 1978, another restaurant, known as The Bahamas, occupied the first floor for approximately two years. Canvas awnings which project from the northwest storefronts were added.

At present, the entire building is vacant, awaiting rehabilitation. Redevelopment of the Mutual Life Building for contemporary retail and office use is now underway under its current owner, The Emerald Fund of San Francisco, who acquired the building with Historic Seattle in 1982.

(Much of the factual information contained in this report was taken from a study by Don Miles Associates, Seattle, dated December 9, 1981, pages 10 - 16).

A PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE BUILDING

The 100' x 82' Mutual Life Building is six stories with a full basement. Building floor area is approximately 52,000 square feet. Less detailed in design than some other Pioneer Square structures, it is, nevertheless, a fine example of the Late Victorian or Victorian Romanesque architecture prevalent in Seattle buildings constructed after the great fire of 1889.

Located on the northwest corner of Yesler Way and First Avenue, the building abuts the Post Hotel to the west and a parking lot, formerly the site of the Starr-Boyd Building, to the north. It is directly west and across First Avenue from Pioneer Place and three National Landmark structures, the Iron Pergola, the Totem Pole, and the Pioneer Building.

The main building is of masonry-mill construction, with a number of interior steel framing members. The rear addition is entirely framed in steel. Principal exterior materials are a red Colorado and grey "Chuckanut" sandstone base, grey-buff colored brick body, red and orange sandstone detailing, and a copper cornice.

Five bays face First Avenue while three face south onto Yesler Way. Corner bays project slightly. Above the first floor, each bay typically contains three wood-frame, double-hung windows.

The sandstone base, which has been altered extensively since original construction, is now painted. At the southeast corner bays, the storefronts have been covered with wood paneling. The arched central entrance remains intact, although the Richardsonian Romanesque capitals and decorative impost bands are very deteriorated. The "MUTUAL LIFE BUILDING" sign above the entrance is barely readable. The entry itself is raised several steps and recessed. Entry vestibule wainscoting is of pink Breccia Pernice marble. The richly detailed wood paneling above is badly weathered but substantially intact. A secondary entrance appears in the westernmost bay of the Yesler Way elevation. It features an ornate wrought iron gate and elegant leaded glass window above. A basement entrance is also located in this bay.

The second and third, and fourth and fifth floors are externally articulated as horizontal units separated vertically by a sandstone string course. Large elliptical arches cover third floor window groupings facing First Avenue and one Yesler Way bay. Each window in the remaining Third floor Yesler Way bays is individually arched. All windows on the fifth floor are also arched. These arches spring from Romanesque column capitals.

An intricately detailed cornice molding divides the fifth and sixth floors. The sixth floor is undetailed except for a deep classical copper cornice that crowns the building.

At the rear (west side) of the building, which rises two floors above the Post Hotel, a large white tile sign with letters appear just below the cornice. It reads "MUTUAL LIFE INS OF NY".

On the west side of the building an 18' x 30' open light court extends up from a first floor skylight. The light court separates two rear wings which measure approximately 30' x 41' each, floors 3 to 6. Four skylights of varying sizes appear on the roof. The largest of these, above the main entrance, covers a 12' x 18' light well which admits light to the fourth through sixth floors.

At present, the first floor interior contains large unoccupied restaurant spaces. Little original material remains, except for a large walk-in bank vault.

The remaining floors have been little altered since reaching their final form during the first part of this century. The finish wood used on floors 1 through 3 was Honduras Mahogany, which also appears in the west half of floors 4 to 6. Elsewhere finish woods are Western Red Cedar or Douglas fir. Other principal features include corridors with tile flooring and wainscoting, ornate wrought iron elevator screens, and a marble staircase with cast iron newel posts and risers and railings of wrought iron and wood. The upper floors are all divided into numerous small offices typical of commercial tenant spaces of the early 20th century.

All office floors are arranged around a central north-south corridor from which the stairway, elevators, and most offices are entered. Small hallways lead through arched firedoors to the west wings.

NOTE: The text does not describe recent events, but rather describes the history and condition of the Mutual Life Building immediately preceding the most recent rehabilitation (1983-84).

Additional information can be found in field records.

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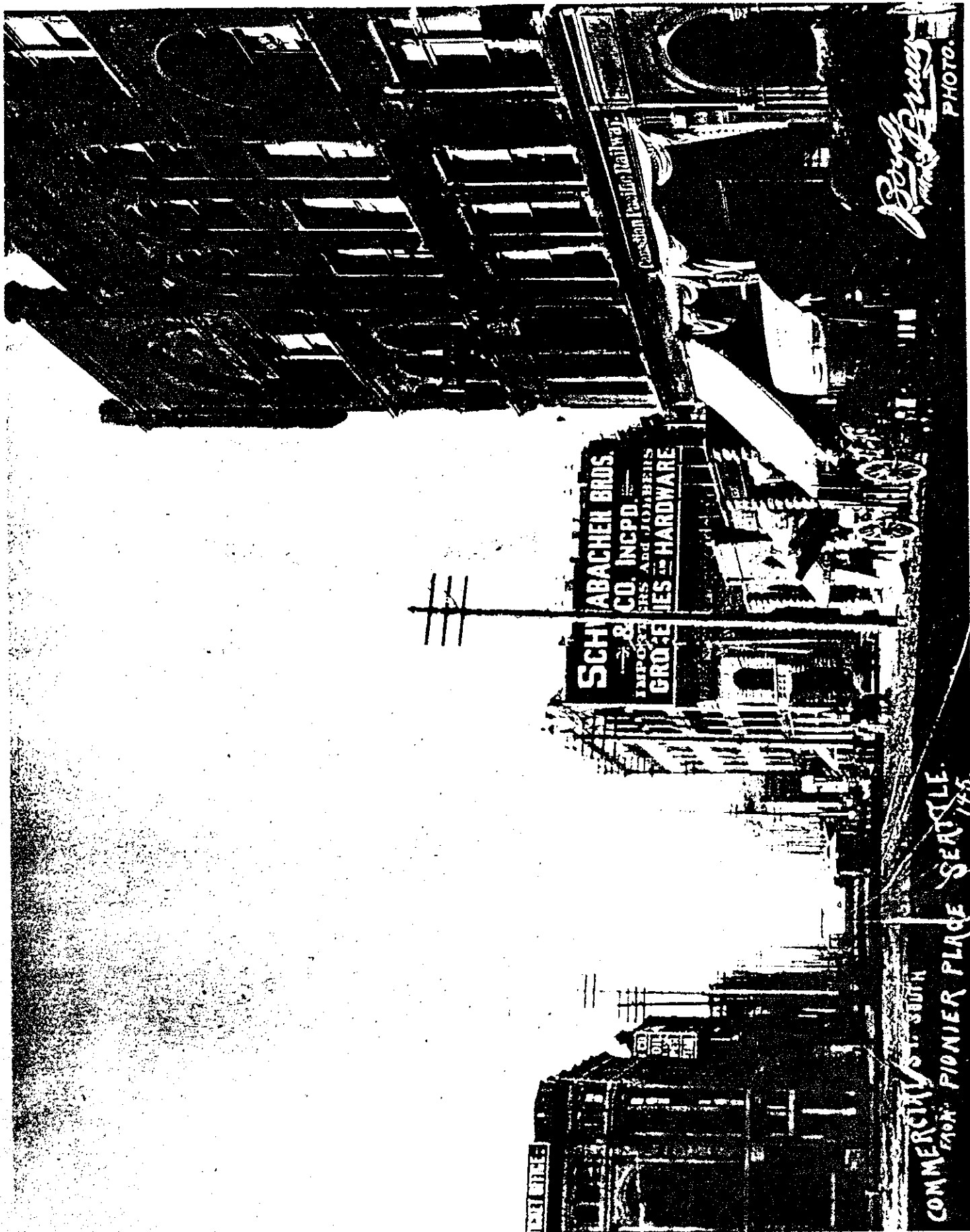
Struve Scrapbook. "Elmer Fisher" (biographical sketch). Vol. 1, p. 26.

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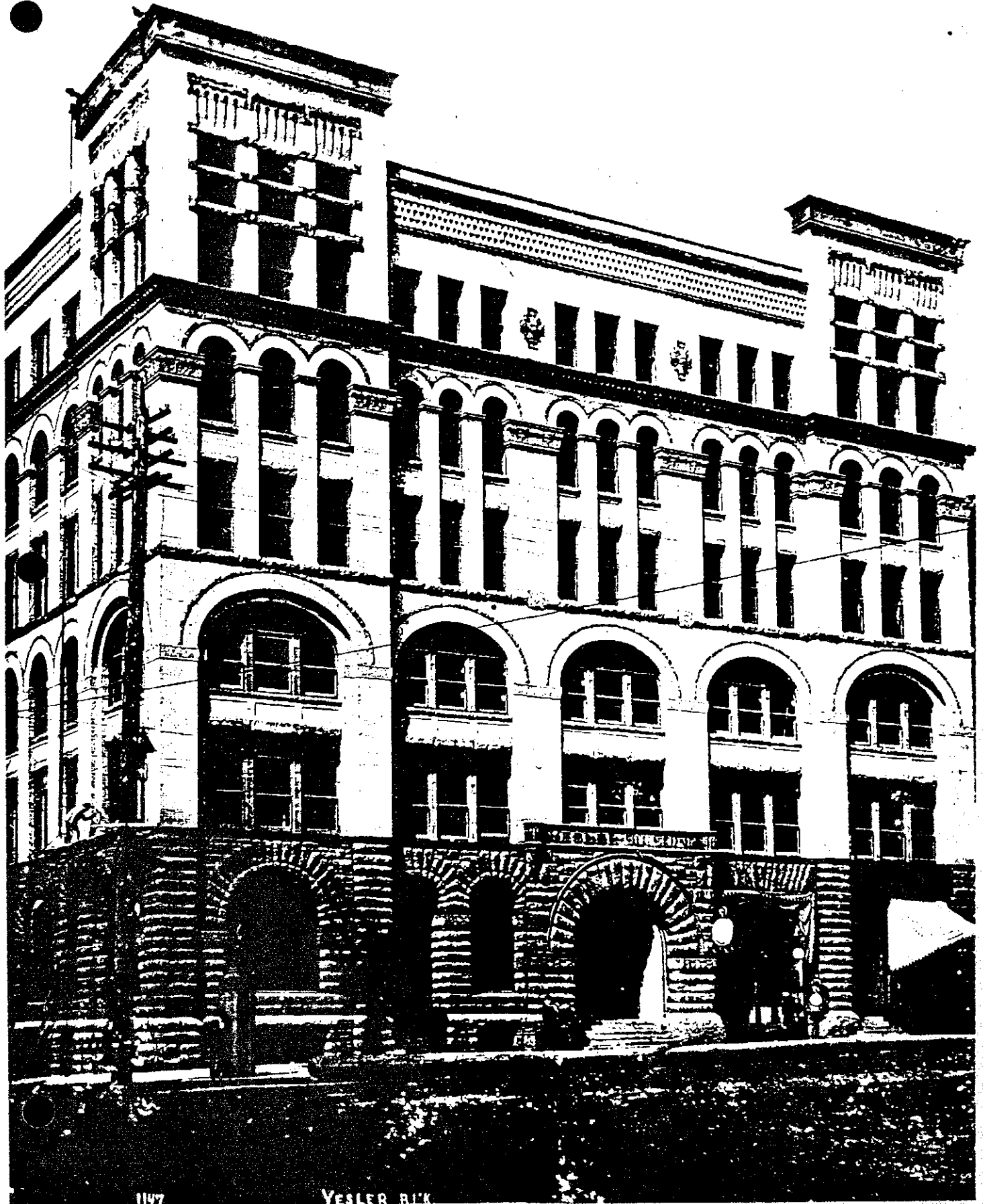
Washington, State of. King County Regional Archives. "Permanent
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FIRST FLOOR, ONE-STORY BUILDING FROM 1880-97, SHOWING ORIGINAL RUSTICATION OF STONE BASE
(From the Photographic Collection, Univ. of WA, Boyd & Brass, Photographers, 1891)

SOUTH SIDE, FIRST ADDITION OF FLOORS 2 - 6
(From the Museum of History & Industry, Seattle,
Frank LaRoche, Photographer. ca 1896)

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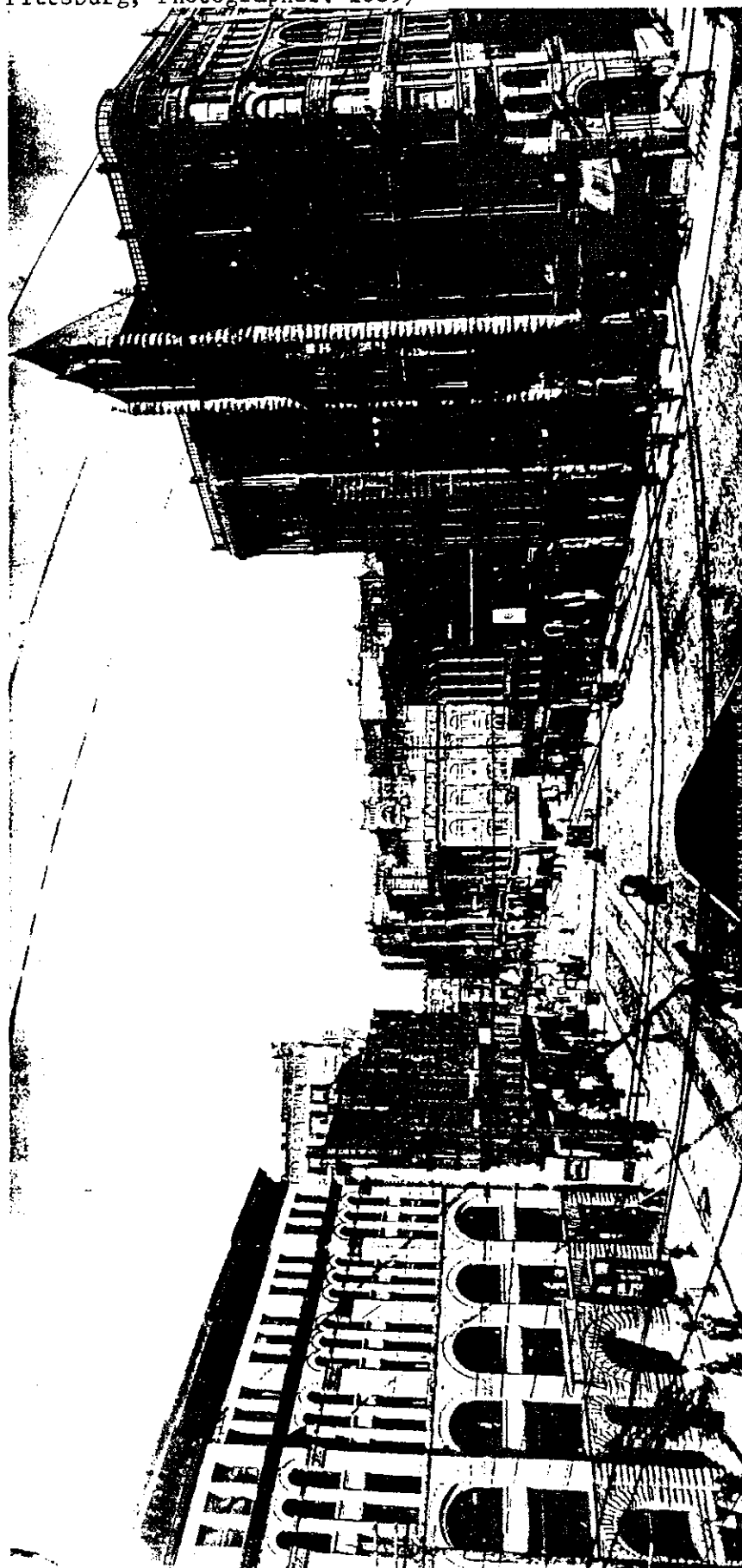
SOUTH & EAST SIDES, DECORATED TO CELEBRATE THE RETURN OF
VOLUNTEERS FROM THE SPANISH AMERICAN WAR, AND SHOWING THE
ORIGINAL ARCHED WINDOWS & RAISED FLOOR LEVELS AT THE
FIRST FLOOR (From the photography Collection, Univ. of WA, Wilhelm Hester, Photog.. 1889)

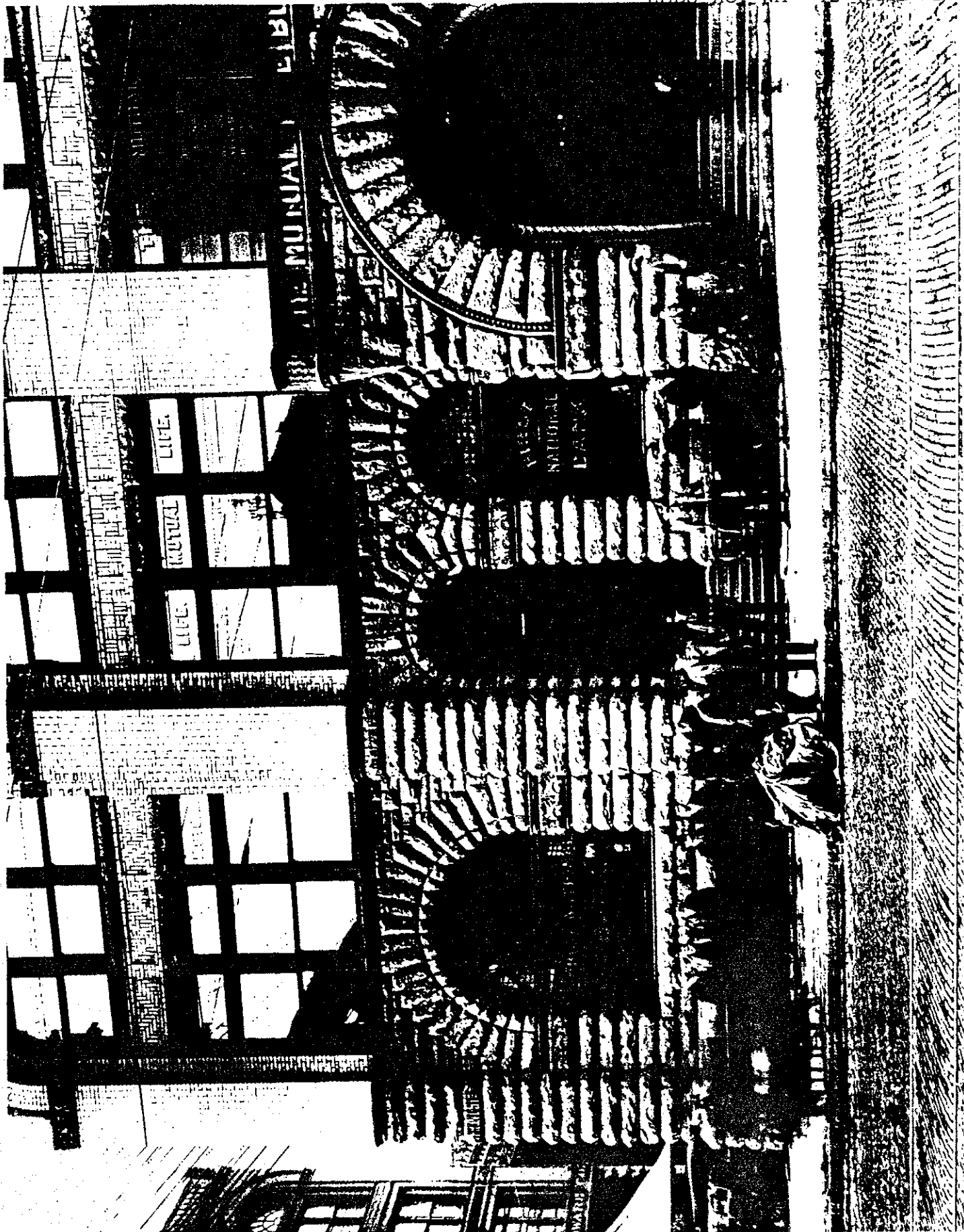
Mutual Life Building
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SOUTH SIDE OF BUILDING (AT LEFT) & VIEW NORTH OF PIONEER
SQUARE & FRONT STREET (FIRST AVENUE)
(From the Photography Collection, University of
Washington. William Pittsburg, Photographer. 1889)

Mutual Life Building
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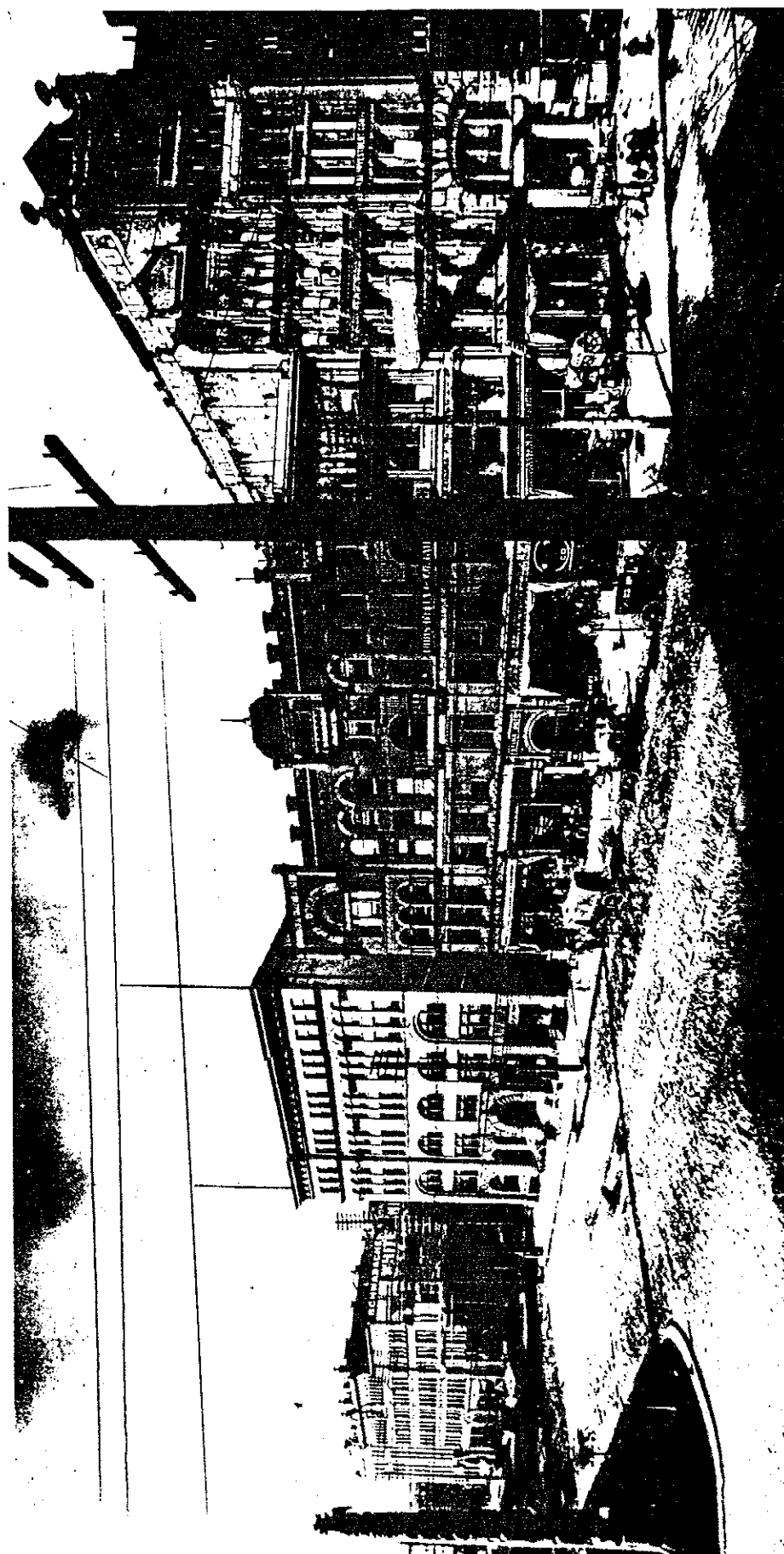




SOUTH SIDE AT FIRST FLOOR, SHOWING ORIGINAL ENTRY, ARCHED WINDOWS & RUSTICATED STONE BASE
(From the Photography Collection, University of Washington, Photographer Unknown, ca. 1897)

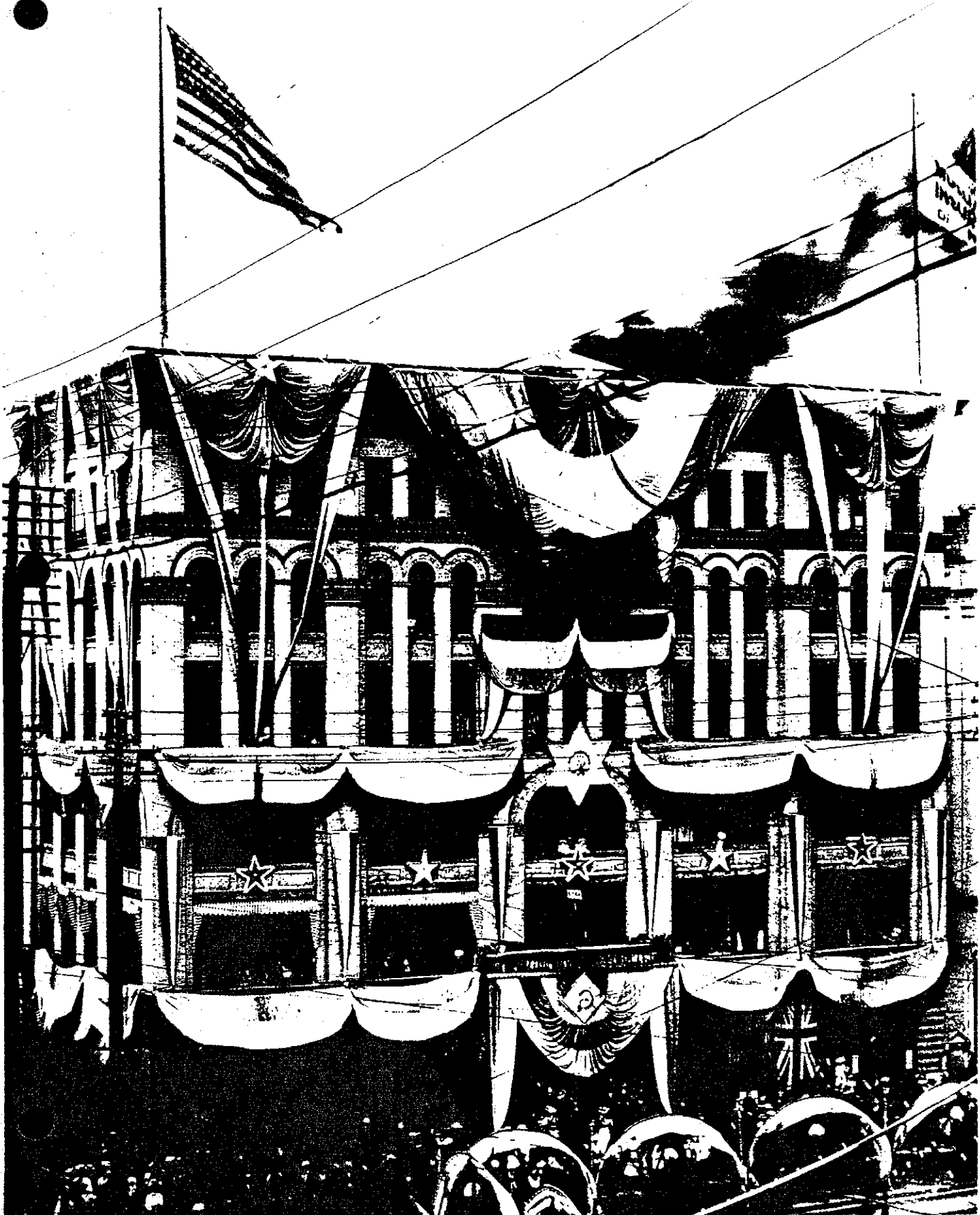
SOUTH SIDE OF BUILDING SHOWING THE WEST SIDE OF FRONT
STREET (FIRST AVENUE) (From the Photographv Collection,
University of Washington, Arthur Warren, Photographer.
1899)

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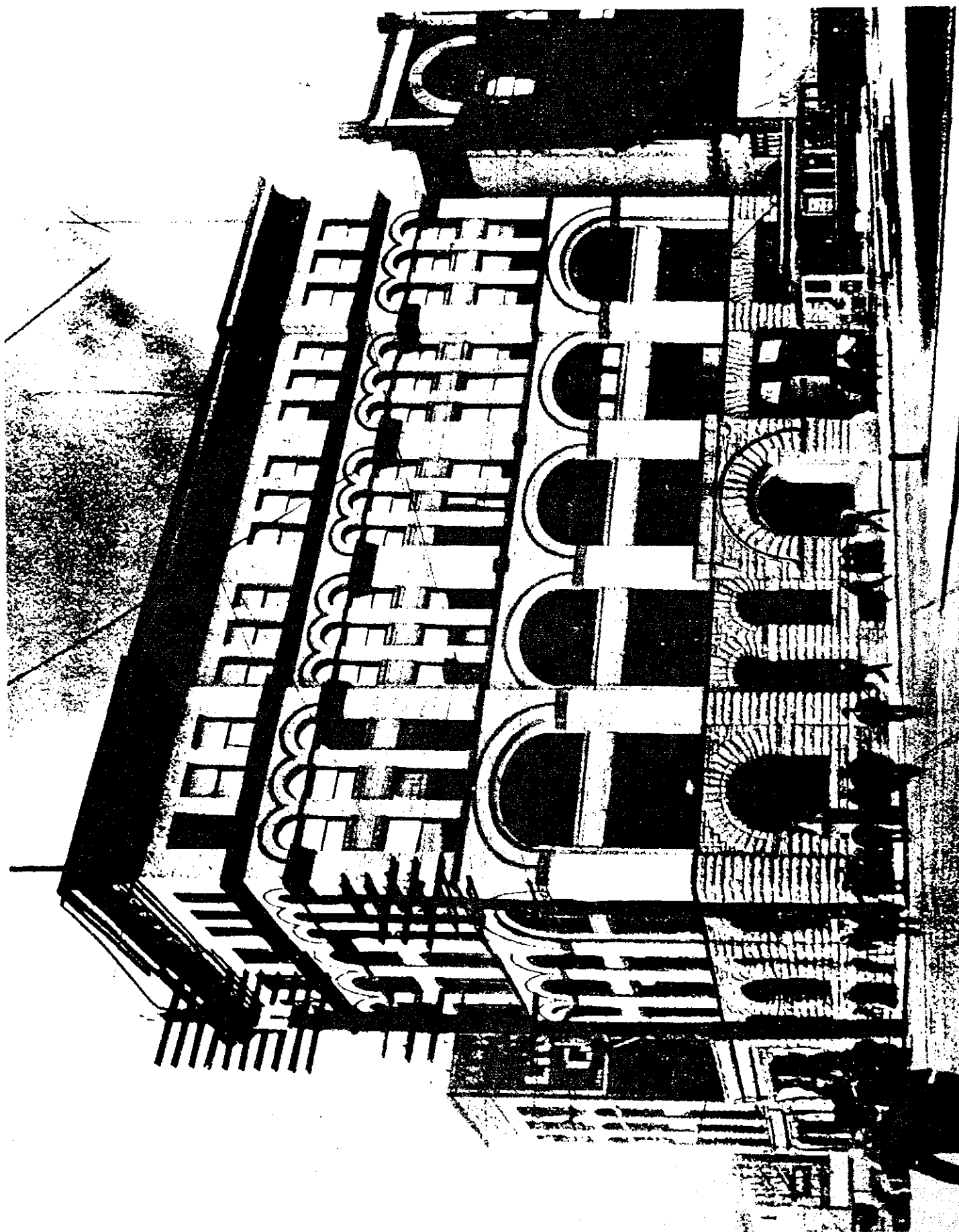
SOUTH SIDE, DECORATED FOR CIVIC CELEBRATION
(From the Photography Collection, University of
Washington, Wilhelm Hester. Photographer, ca. 1900)

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SOUTH & EAST SIDES, SHOWING THE BUILDING PRIOR TO THE
30' FAR WESTERN ADDITION OF 1904 (From the photographic
collection, University of Washington, Ashel Curtis,
Photographer, ca. 1902)

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SOUTH & EAST SIDES, AFTER FINAL 30' ADDITION AT WEST
SIDE, & SHOWING REMOVAL OF RUSTICATED SURFACE OF STONE
BA E, WINDOW LINTELS & SILLS (From the Photography Collection
University of WA, Ashel Curtis, Photographer, ca. 1905)

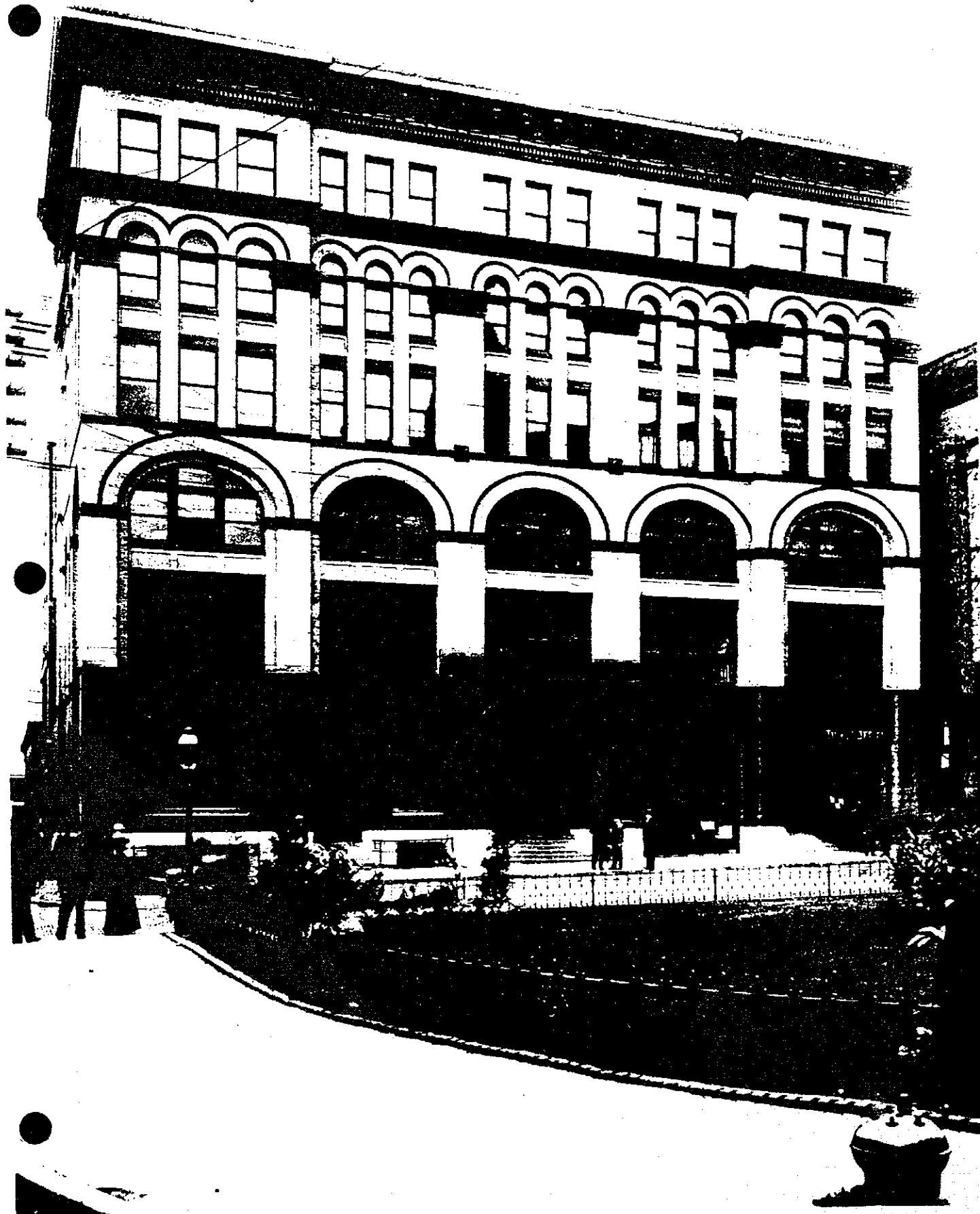
Mutual Life Building
HABS no. WA- 42 (page 25)

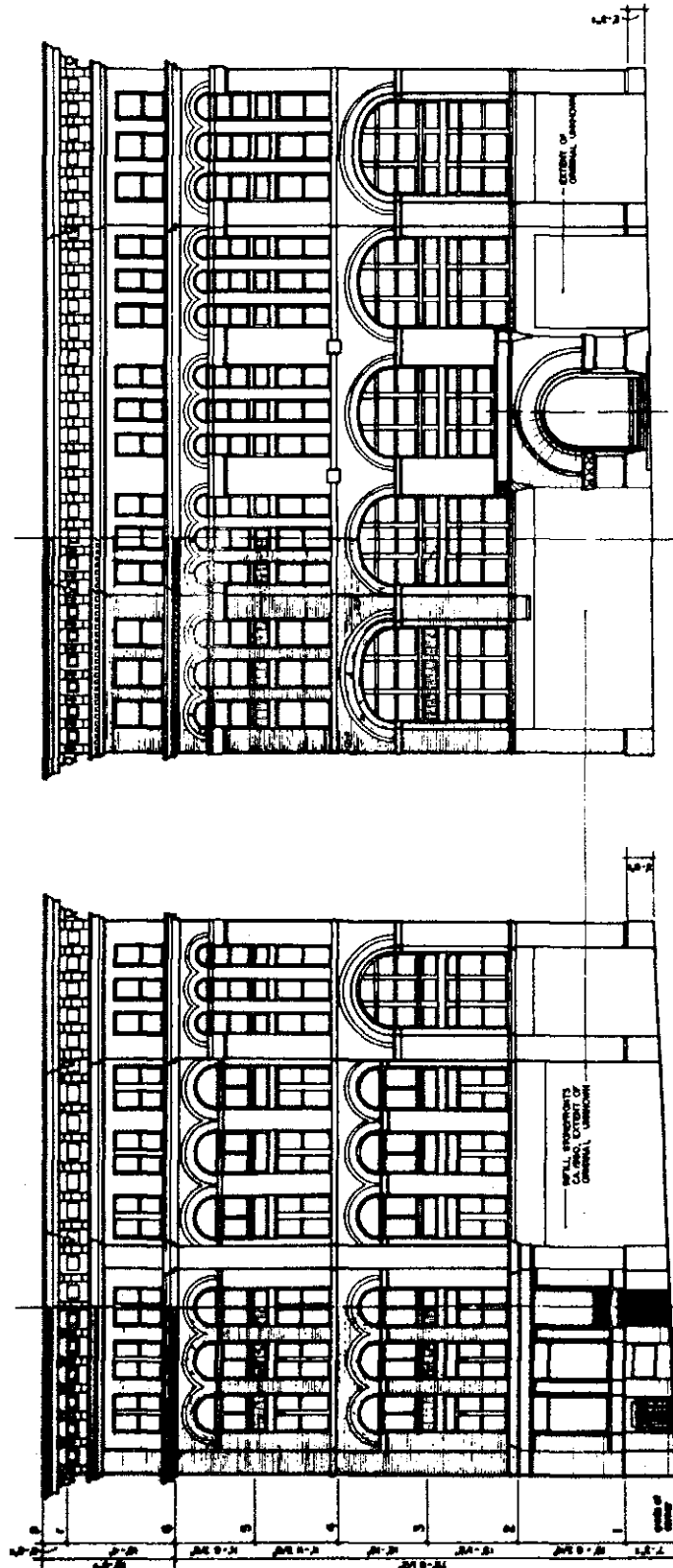


SOUTH SIDE, SHOWING SMOOTH STONE AT BASE, WINDOW LINTELS & S
SILLS, AND SHOWING ORIGINAL RAISED FIRST FLOOR LEVEL &
ARCHED FIRST FLOOR WINDOWS (From the Photography
Collection, Ashel Curtis, Photographer, ca. 1905)

University of WA.

Mutual Life Building
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east elevation

south elevation

THE MUTUAL LIFE BUILDING WAS CONSTRUCTED IN SEVERAL PHASES, AND IS TYPICAL OF THE VICTORIAN ROMANESQUE ARCHITECTURE OF SEATTLE'S HISTORIC PIONEER SQUARE DISTRICT. THESE HABS AS-BUILT DRAWINGS WERE PREPARED IN 1983 AS PART OF A REHABILITATION PROJECT TO BE COMPLETED IN 1984.



THE MUTUAL LIFE BUILDING
801 - 807
FIRST AVENUE
SEATTLE
KING COUNTY
1890 - 1897, 1904 & 1916

